United Nations A/C.4/57/SR.18

General Assembly
Fifty-seventh session

Official Records

Distr.: General
2 December 2002

Original: English

Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 18th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 31 October 2002, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Maitland ..... (South Africa)

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Agenda item 79: Questions relating to information (*continued*) (A/57/21, A/57/157)

1. **Mr. Arrouchi** (Morocco) expressed his delegation's support for the Secretary-General's proposals to modernize the Department of Public Information, which had a strategic role to play at a time when the multiple challenges of globalization called for multilateral action. Lamenting the proliferating mandates which had resulted in a fragmentation of the Department's activities and ambiguity surrounding its mission (A/57/157, para. 64), he called for greater efficiency and effectiveness by focusing on the main priorities which had already been defined.

2. His delegation had some preliminary views with regard to proposals for the restructuring of the Department of Public Information. First of all, strategic effectiveness — not budgetary constraints — should be the impetus for reviewing United Nations information and communication policies. The review process should take into consideration the special needs of developing countries, particularly in Africa, the continent hardest hit by poverty, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS. His delegation would welcome synergy between the Department and other Secretariat departments and strategic partnerships with the media, non-governmental organizations and educational institutions that could disseminate the Organization's messages stressing the importance of linguistic parity among the six official languages, he welcomed the announcement that the United Nations News Centre would soon be available in all six official languages. With regard to the United Nations information centres, his delegation applauded the Secretary-General's flexible approach to the creation of regional hubs and looked forward to a constructive debate on the matter. Since multilateralism was necessary in order to implement the commitments undertaken by Member States in the Millennium Declaration, divisiveness over public information policies and practices could not be justified.

3. **Mr. Kanaan** (Observer for the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)) said that, against the backdrop of Islamophobia in the media after the events of 11 September 2001, which posed unprecedented challenges to the Islamic world, the Ministerial Follow-up Committee of the Fifth Session of the Islamic Conference of Information Ministers, held in Tehran in November 2001, had stressed the need to update the mechanisms to implement the Information Strategy of Islamic States and amend the Islamic Information Code of Ethics. The OIC Standing Committee for Information and Cultural Affairs, chaired by the President of Senegal, was working to develop and strengthen the Organization's information strategies by promoting cooperation among its member States and by keeping abreast of new information and communication technologies to enable them to meet contemporary challenges.

4. The ongoing cooperation between the United Nations and OIC, particularly between the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (IESCO), was highlighted in the report of the Secretary-General on cooperation between the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (A/57/405). In its information activities, OIC emphasized priority areas identified by the major United Nations global conferences, including poverty eradication; basic education, particularly for girls; and capacity-building in the area of information and communication technologies. Dialogue among civilizations was a new dimension of cooperation between the United Nations and OIC. A first step in that direction had been taken with the convening of the OIC European Union Joint Forum held in Istanbul in February 2002. At the twenty-ninth Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, held in Khartoum, Sudan, in June 2002, a decision had been taken to establish a permanent open-ended committee on dialogue among civilizations.

5. OIC efforts to narrow the digital divide in the field of information and communications included the Al Azhar online project, providing access to information on the Islamic culture and heritage from one of the oldest universities and religious institutions in the world; an information and communication technologies summit meeting, held in the United Arab Emirates, to discuss the role of Governments in promoting information and communication policies and programmes; and the completion of the 20-year project, undertaken in cooperation with UNESCO, concerning the Library of Alexandria, Egypt. Other initiatives included the establishment of an Islamic satellite channel and the provision of human, material and

technical support to the Islamic States Broadcasting Organization and the International Islamic News Agency. Additionally, IESCO had been mandated to develop a detailed programme to refute the denigration of Islam and Islamic civilization by the Western media. OIC member States had been encouraged to participate actively in the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Tunisia in 2005, with a view to exploring ways and means of bridging the digital divide between the developed and developing countries.

6. As the Israeli Government continued its bloody and inhumane military campaign against the Palestinian people, their properties and institutions in the occupied Palestinian Territories, committing war crimes, practising State terrorism and sabotaging the peace process, it was incumbent on the United Nations to devote greater attention to the question of Palestine, including in the field of information. In that connection, OIC commended the Department of Public Information on implementing its special programme to enhance public awareness of the question of Palestine, for example, the International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People, held in New York in September 2002. He also praised the Department's training programmes for Palestinian journalists and staff from the Palestinian National Authority.

7. Referring to the summary by the President of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly on the meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development (A/57/280), he said that OIC agreed that the United Nations was uniquely placed to provide the normative policy framework for addressing the challenges of information and communication technology policies. In his statement to the General Assembly, the President of Senegal had stressed the importance of information and communication technologies, one of the main priorities of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and had also highlighted the need to support regional collaborative efforts and initiatives in that regard.

8. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information) expressed gratitude for Committee members' reaffirmation of the importance of the Department of Public Information and their support for its efforts to prioritize its work. In response to comments made on behalf of the Caribbean Community and by other delegations, he stressed that the Secretary-General and the Department would not be setting new priorities for the Organization; Member States had already done that at the Millennium Summit and recent international conferences, and it was now the Department's task to communicate those priorities effectively. A number of speakers had said that the role of the Committee on Information was critical in any reform of the Department of Public Information. He fully agreed that the broad directives for the Department's work should emanate from intergovernmental bodies; however, within those parameters, it was the Secretariat's responsibility to organize that work effectively. The immediate administrative restructuring of the Department at Headquarters would thus be implemented on 1 November 2002 under the authority of the Secretary-General, since it concerned merely the way in which the Department would be organized to fulfil the challenges identified by Member States that restructuring would in fact facilitate the implementation of the Department's mandate. Since reform was an ongoing process, the Committee on Information would always be a guide and a partner in that undertaking.

9. Noting that many Committee members had emphasized the importance of a strengthened evaluation culture based on programme impact reviews, he said that each of the Department's activities and products would be evaluated regularly. The current restructuring of the Department reflected the results of its own detailed review and evaluation of its work thus far. Replying to the representatives of Japan and the United States of America, he said that, although the Secretary-General had proposed three years as a reasonable time frame for an evaluation, that did not mean that the Department would wait three years to evaluate its work. Evaluation would be an ongoing process; he had already instituted the necessary training programme in the Department to prepare managers to conduct such evaluations as part of their regular work.

10. Many delegations had praised the Department for its use of new communications technologies and stressed the importance of the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in two phases in Geneva and Tunis in 2003 and 2005, respectively. He was currently making arrangements with representatives of the television industry and the Swiss

Government to organize a World Electronic Media Forum as a side event to the first part of the Summit.

11. Pointing out that more people received news of the United Nations through the traditional media of radio and television than from the web site, he said that the United Nations radio had tens of millions of listeners and that the Department had established partnerships with over 160 major broadcasters around the world, including the Voice of Nigeria, the Voice of Egypt, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Africa Numero Uno, National Radio of Argentina, China National Radio and the Voice of Russia. Scores of other radio stations in Latin America, Africa and the Arab world used the United Nations daily news bulletins via other networks. It was therefore not surprising that many Committee members had called for the pilot radio project in the 2004-2005 biennium to be placed on a sounder financial footing. The United Nations News Centre and the News Service were geared primarily to developing countries' media needs. Of 109 countries which subscribed to the News Service's e-mail version, 84 were developing countries or countries in transition. United Nations television disseminated footage from the meeting room, and formal distribution partnerships were now being established with television networks that carried "United Nations in Action" features and the half-hour interview programme known as "The World Chronicle". Details of those activities appeared on the new media partnership page (www.un.org/av/mediapartnerships.htm). In response to a number of questions, he could assure the Committee that the Department had no intention of discontinuing its press releases service.

12. He thanked the representative of Jamaica for her praise of the live radio project and noted that a number of other radio stations in the Caribbean, including in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines would begin airing it in early November. He explained that most of the material previously contained in the weekly taped Caribbean magazine was now included in either the daily newscast or the weekly round-up produced on Fridays.

13. The Department remained committed to promoting multilingualism, within the budgetary constraints determined by Member States. The United Nations web site had benefited from the loan of an expert funded by the Government of Spain, whose contract had unfortunately just ended. An agreement had been made with a Spanish university to translate documents for the web site free of charge, with some 1,000 pages having been published to date, and a similar agreement was under negotiation with the University of Cairo. He urged Governments to encourage such arrangements with the United Nations and also recalled the proposals of the Secretary-General in his report (A/57/355) to reinforce the Department's presence on the web site in all the official languages.

14. The Department had never before sought any resources for its web site operations and had relied instead on reallocating existing resources. The web site had been built entirely by redeploying 17 existing posts. Furthermore, the widely acclaimed United Nations News Centre and the e-mail-based News Service, currently in English and French, would soon be available in all the official languages. Those activities had been realized through redeployment of 13 existing posts. Finally, the Department had redeployed a Director-level post and two other posts to create a new Internet service. That service would significantly enhance effectiveness and build greater synergies with other production and information units of the Department and the Secretariat. The Department had now exhausted the potential pool for redeployment. The request for additional resources to narrow the gap in services between all the language sites had been made only after a careful review of whether additional posts could in fact be redeployed.

15. The *United Nations Chronicle* was deliberately pursuing an editorial policy of academic debate and discussion, rather than duplicating the work of reporting on United Nations activities and events. As part of the restructuring exercise, it had been integrated into the new Educational Outreach Section. The option of closing the *Chronicle* had been seriously considered but it did in fact have an audience, in particular in the academic and non-governmental community. The investment in the parent edition remained modest since it was printed internally and writers contributed articles without remuneration. Additional resources had been necessary to produce the magazine in all the official languages, as requested by the General Assembly, but those resources had been kept to a minimum thanks to innovative co-publishing arrangements with identified partners in the respective language areas. The *Chronicle* had also maintained its relevance by means

of a regularly updated online edition, which had recently received a web award of excellence. The *Chronicle* and its staff were therefore an important component of the Department's overall Internet strategy.

16. Turning to the United Nations information centres, he said that the Department took note of Member States' concerns about the proposal to create regional hubs; if that proposal was approved by the General Assembly, the Department would implement it on a case-by-case basis, in close cooperation with the host countries. He also stressed that dissemination of information in local languages, on the Internet and in printed form, was a priority for the information centres, within the limits of available resources. To date, 48 information centres had Internet sites in the six official languages as well as in 26 local languages and printed documents were often available in local languages. The Department, in collaboration with other organizations, was continuing to develop new methods to increase its capacity in that regard. As for the resources which could be freed up by the creation of regional hubs, he said that in Western Europe, the creation of a regional hub to replace the nine existing information centres, not including Vienna and Geneva, would free up approximately $3,900,000 during the current biennium. He had taken note of the special situation of the information centres in Yemen and the United Republic of Tanzania and their staffing needs.

17. Great progress had been made in strengthening the Department of Public Information's collaboration with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. An information specialist with peacekeeping experience would shortly be added to the Department staff. The designation of the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers would also provide a peg for the Department's information efforts. The Department was studying the possibility of increased cooperation with external commercial entities and was developing closer partnerships within the United Nations system, principally, though not exclusively, through the United Nations Communications Group.

18. The Department would continue its successful training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries. He noted that a total of 34 African journalists had participated in two separate programmes at Headquarters during the preceding four years; those efforts would continue. With regard to the special information programme on the question of Palestine, although the annual training programme for Palestinian media practitioners had had to be postponed due to visa difficulties, that matter was being discussed with the host country and it was hoped the programme would take place early in 2003. The Department was also actively planning a 2003 media encounter on peace in the Middle East.

19. On the question of hate speech, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, he stressed that the Department was devoting great attention to promoting the Charter principles of coexistence and tolerance and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and would continue the successful programmes relating to the Dialogue among Civilizations. He joined in condemning any use of violence to silence journalists or indeed any obstruction of their work and mourned those journalists who had lost their lives. The media were essential allies of any organization, and any threat to the freedom of journalists was a threat to the freedom of all.

20. With regard to the proposals to integrate and modernize United Nations library services, the Department would bear in mind the requests for a full review. The Department in association with the Special Committee on Decolonization, would continue to ensure the widest possible dissemination of information on decolonization. Moreover, in cooperation with the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea of the Office of Legal Affairs, the Department was preparing a promotional campaign to publicize the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, to be observed by the General Assembly on 9-10 December 2002. The Department would also continue its work to increase awareness of major United Nations conferences.

21. Lastly, he welcomed the desire of the delegation of Switzerland to become the 100th member of the Committee on Information, a sign of that Committee's vitality.

Draft resolution A entitled "Information in the service of humanity"

Draft resolution B entitled "United Nations public information policies and activities"

Draft decision entitled "Increase in the membership of the Committee on Information"

22. **The Chairman** invited the Committee to take action on draft resolutions A and B and the draft decision contained in paragraph 70 of the report of the Committee on Information (A/57/21).

23. **Ms. Wilkinson** (Secretary of the Committee) said that with regard to the programme budget implications of the draft resolutions and draft decisions, she had been informed by the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Finance, that the budgetary implications contained in the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Strengthening the Department of Public Information, within the existing capacity, in order to support and enhance the United Nations web site in all official languages of the Organization" (A/57/355) prepared in accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/253 (paras. 145 and 149) contained sufficient information for the consideration of the Committee. She had also been informed that the Fifth Committee was currently considering that report.

24. *Draft resolutions A and B and the draft decision entitled "Increase in the membership of the Committee on Information" were adopted.*

25. **Mr. Blanco** (Venezuela), recalling the recommendations in the area of information made by the Secretary-General in his report on strengthening of the United Nations (A/57/387) and further recalling that the strengthening of the United Nations was an ongoing process, which required the widest possible consultations, suggested that in future the Committee should hold an interactive dialogue with the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information on the issue of continuing reform, particularly in the context of the Secretary-General's report. That dialogue could be organized in the Committee during the next regular session of the General Assembly, within the existing allocation of meetings. States could continue to take part in the general debate on the item relating to information at the plenary session. He noted that a similar mechanism was used during consideration of the agenda item on peacekeeping operations in all their aspects. An interactive dialogue would provide Member States with an opportunity to deal in a more direct and flexible manner with issues relating to reform of the Organization in the area of public information; it would be particularly valuable in the context of the three-year evaluation of the Committee's work.

26. **The Chairman** said that the Secretariat had taken due note of the proposal made.

27. **Mr. Requeijo** (Cuba), speaking in exercise of the right of reply and referring to the statement made by the representative of the United States of America on the previous day, said that his delegation had not attempted to depart from the Committee's agenda; it had in fact been the representative of the United States who had done so with his comments on the Cuban social system. His delegation had not tried to politicize the debate; it had simply denounced, as in the past, the flagrant violations of international broadcasting norms which were committed daily against Cuba in the name of so-called freedom of information. Such broadcasts were illegal and immoral; moreover, the Cuban people were educated and were perfectly capable of seeking out information and ascertaining the truth. The ineffectiveness of the broadcasts was what gave rise to the ire of the United States delegation.

28. The Proyecto Varela supposedly supported by some 11,000 Cubans, was in fact an American-inspired initiative. Moreover, 8.2 million Cubans had freely decided to ratify their Constitution shortly after the small Proyecto Varela group, sponsored by the United States interests section in Havana, had submitted its petition on constitutional reform, which was currently being reviewed by the appropriate constitutional authorities. He also recalled that the Cuban people had learnt of the project when Cuban radio and television had broadcast live the speech made by former United States President Carter at the University of Havana, which had not been carried by Radio Martí. He wondered why an American-sponsored station had censored that statement by a former President of the United States who shortly thereafter had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.